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Alzheimer's – the cruellest disease?



There is a new public awareness which is being embraced by our politicians about dementia. It's a cruel word meaning 'loss of mind' with connotations of JK Rowling's scariest creation of Harry Potter's 'dementors' who suck your soul and mind from you and leave you mad. The fear of losing one's mind is perhaps the scariest thing of all which is why, even more than cancer; it has been something of a taboo subject.

But surely this is a subject for the medics rather than the lawyers?

I recently attended a conference in London for lawyers specialising in advice to the elderly. The keynote speaker was John Suchet (former ITN news reader) who spoke emotionally about his wife's suffering from Alzheimer's Disease. As he said, he had reported from war zones but had never faced such a personally exhausting challenge. While he spoke, it seemed to me that he had perhaps not received the best legal (or medical) advice; which goes to prove that the best advice isn't necessarily the most expensive.

Another speaker was the Public Guardian, who in reality is a far cry from the super-hero status that his title might suggest and instead is a career civil servant. He heads up the Office of the Public Guardian which is the executive arm of the Court of Protection and amongst other things handles the registration of Lasting Powers of Attorney ("LPAs") and their supervision. There has been a big increase in the number of LPAs being made (which is good) but the OPG is only just now shifting the backlog of registration.

So what is the point that I am I trying to make? Well, first, there seems to be a genuine political wish to improve the services available to Alzheimer's sufferers and their families. The cost of this is unbelievably huge as there is no quick-fix.

The NHS and social services are already overstretched and the charity/private sector simply doesn't have the funding or infrastructure to do what is needed. It remains as much of a 'postcode lottery' as many other areas of care-provision.

From a legal angle, the importance of taking advice from a suitably-qualified and experienced solicitor remains critical. Not having the necessary legal structures in place to enable someone to make decisions regarding finances and/or personal health and welfare adds further intolerable stress at a time when everyone is already stretched to their limit. There is valuable legal advice to be had about the funding that can be available to pay for the very specialist and often complex care required and this can be a lifeline.

If you know someone who has had a diagnosis of dementia, in any one of its many and differing forms, than make sure you speak to a member of Solicitors for the Elderly www.solicitorsfortheelderly.com as well as your doctor as early as possible to get the help you need and the legal structures put in place.

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If you require advice on this matter please contact Miranda on 01328 710210. If you require advice on any other legal matter please telephone our Wells office on 01328 710210 or email law@hayes-storr.com.

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